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WHAT REMAINS AFTER ALL

By  
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B.A., Memphis State University, 1980

Presented in partial fulfillment for the degree of  
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Poetry Now: Returning

Phoenix: Covers, Receiving The Visitor, What Beast

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My Father Awakening

The blackbirds die  
again this year:  
their wings drink moonlight  
and lie in the frost.

In her room the sun glares.  
On my mother's eyes,  
my father's hand  
lies in sleep.

In the silence of morning  
they wake. He wipes the window,  
coloring the cold trees,  
looks for footprints,

for a man whose frail wings  
have no coat, who stands  
and speaks the words.

## Receiving The Visitor

The sun flowers. Once  
again darkness falls hand  
over hand to the west  
and the darker shapes  
smelling of wet grass  
disappear through fences.  
With a knock at the door  
I begin to hear. I know it well,

a dark suit, a man bearing flowers.  
They will fill an empty vase.  
What I do is  
shut my eyes and listen.  
A voice speaks:

I don't like my face touched  
and I touch my own  
to be sure.  
This door, I open completely,  
hold out my hands open to the light,  
  
feel the blossoms, breath  
against my face, tongues  
that leap and burn.

## What Beast

What beast will run with our dreams tonight?  
The moonlit fields are streaked with shadows  
that hide the moment  
in the call of a wild hound,  
that mask the blind stare of the moon  
with the passage of a cloud.  
I hear a murmur within the arcade trees  
that frame the moon.  
And from the moonlight, frame to frame  
the leaves silently descend.  
I feel against my leg the tail  
of a dog, who knows  
only the moment of a cloud,  
the scent of a bird.  
In the early morning, the sky will bleed,  
fearing the bruised leaves like the dawn.

## Something I Almost Remember

Again a dream, a knowledge  
I almost have and feel the breath of  
by the river in woods.  
It lies in leaves  
my dog stirs with her snout,  
falls in the rain  
she shakes from her back.

Memory arrives with the arc  
of a flock settling on fields,  
in the rigid point of anticipation  
before she breaks. Rolling  
into the grasses, she disappears.  
Birds feather my neck.

She appears again like leaping  
dolphin. My sponged footprints  
behind, I want to kneel,  
run into the waves with eyes open,  
like she does,  
to rise and fall and rise,  
never wanting more than the chase.

## With The First Wind

If we see the sun crack,  
run into the maddening sea,  
would the cities east of the Sierras  
blink through the night and wait  
for the sun to bathe them?  
The sandy-haired one of the beach  
takes up a guitar  
and strums the moon into a face,  
laughs, and wades into the wild water.

I walk to the crescent edge  
and listen. From somewhere  
at sea the wind drags up voices  
wet with salt and bits of glass.  
They speak of answers and a boat  
to reach them. Their voices burn.  
My blue eyes look to a room.

There I pin blankets  
to walls and stare sunsets  
into the core of my hands.  
I look for the one whose wrist  
shines pale. He knows the sun  
will steam yellow again.  
He knows the young  
have no wrinkles. They smooth  
away with the first wind.

To Fashion A Handle With Stone

You write of urine arcing  
from rooftops, your young eyes

humorous. Standing naked before me  
you speak of stars falling,

offer a flat stomach and balls as proof.  
I don't know the edge,

the leached rock so composed  
it attracts your envy.

I weigh stones in my palm, look  
to their rough edge. You point out

the damp side, cold and dark,  
train my hands to feel grit,

to see under water.  
Your eyes, you say, are mystic.

They open and close in sleep,  
see an ocean beyond our horizon.

On sand, trees have dried to bone  
and a voice that has spoken

for years at your shoulder  
whispers and becomes a man.

Here the ocean spits its useless salt  
over everything. You remove your shoes  
and walk, feel the tow  
entice your ankles. For the first time  
you speak with the stranger.  
You ask for instructions, how to fashion  
a handle decorated with stone. how  
to attach the blade he draws from his coat.  
Among shell and rock your feet touch  
roots. You feel it grow, the excitement  
of reaching your hand into the darkness  
of a knothole solely to feel  
what is inside. It's so easy  
you think. Simply  
place one's hand against the tree,  
breath deeply and shout.

## Covers

I inhale the last moment  
of dark in a yawn.  
The walls pressing like quilts  
hold the night inside.

It settles,  
the night, forming dark,  
around my neck a necklace,  
quilts I caress and draw  
over my head.

Still in the darkness  
I wait for the wind to numb me  
away with the treelimbs  
burning in the moonlight.



## II

because there is in this world no one thing  
to which the bramble of blackberry corresponds,  
a word is elegy to what it signifies.

--Robert Hass

## Not All Faces

That not all faces turn up  
into the flowering heat, simply  
confirms diversity: the prospect  
of any poplar containing within its silver,  
blackbirds, the possibility of not.  
Perhaps sound, scratching branches, or  
perhaps the silence of winter.  
With either that we find, we must be content.  
A small boy with a pellet rifle  
holds a dying bird. Asks forgiveness.  
Around him continues the relentless migration,  
the reasoned patterns of flocks,  
loose leaves in the air,  
the man in a rocker who yawns into sleep.

As If It Should Remain  
Ripening On A Branch

Not with one arm to gather fruit,  
to clear away twigs and seedpods,  
shielding eyes from the shocks  
of light between leaves, but  
with both hands outstretched,  
consider each movement a promise.  
Take for your own only that  
which loosens in rough wind.  
Right now: trees sing each to the other  
as you stoop, sparrows rattle leaves,  
the sky opens after a long rain  
suddenly blue, and the air  
overripe with the young scent,  
the spotfires of mashed persimmon.

## Orion

At twilight I slip across the levee  
into a cluster of trees, lose myself in them  
and remain until after dark.  
I could believe life began here  
where I shed the river fog  
as I once did water.  
I wait till hunger flushes me from the trees  
and drives me into the starlit meadow  
in search of prey, each sapling a weapon.  
From within the circle of fire beneath a maple,  
I rise when the Pleiades spark  
in high branches. Each silhouetted limb  
is a boundary I must cross, each phantom sister  
a reminder of the distance I must follow.

## Accepting A Promise

She arrives severly radiant, hair pulled  
cleanly from her face, hands opened  
with attritions of thaw. No longer  
constant in plans, she plants freely  
an early garden. Simply is.  
It is not closed, this access  
to the inner flowering of spring,  
only changed. Joined in shadow, touch, and  
learning with each crystal of snow that fades,  
we separate the straw from the buds,  
nourish each as prophecy,  
accept the promise of difficulties:  
shoot that struggle through April snow,  
a darkness blooming, a growth rearranged.

### III

Who's turned us round like this, so that we always,  
do what we may, retain the attitude  
of someone who's departing? Just as he,  
on the last hill, that shows him all his valley  
for the last time, will turn and stop and linger,  
we live our lives, for ever taking leave.

--Rainer Maria Rilke

## Toward Distant Water

1

The bluffs we drive from  
sink slowly into what  
must be the river, the gap  
where Wolf river bites into  
the Mississippi already gone.

We can close our eyes  
to death. I close mine  
to these Arkansas fields  
and open them  
to stark paddies, to people  
bent at the waist, their pants  
bound tightly at their calfs.

Some straighten and wave  
others mouth greetings  
I cannot hear.  
They grow and blurr  
then sharpen into streaks  
of rain on glass.  
The road climbs

from farmlands to mountains,  
from farmers to folks.  
You're singing again, a song  
from these hills, how on a Sunday  
a family gathers around a grave,  
shovels earth with their own hands.  
They bury their dead only once.

2

At sunset, near El Paso,  
we scrape bones from the ground  
with our boots,  
stake our tent to the desert  
between two cactus, and pour water  
quickly over our hands, shivering.  
In silence we sit at the fire,  
hearing restless movement,  
the shadows just beyond the bones.  
You hold your fiddle close  
at your neck. I watch the fire perform.  
The song, from back home,  
draws the darkness towards the flame.  
Above, the Texas stars begin  
their slow circle, pulling up,  
growing more distinct as they turn.

3

At eight in the morning  
a corner table  
with beans, tortillas, and beer  
and half a dozen hostile stares,  
I feel a voice  
that has followed me for days,  
haunted me from billboards,  
called to me with wrinkled feet.  
I begin to see  
more than empty palms, ragged  
shoots of rice, more than



a kid asking how much  
I'll pay for a woman.

4

At the church door, a stooped woman  
speaks to us of candles,  
collects money for a funeral.  
We don't know that man  
padlocked in a glass casket,  
but pretend to look at the architecture,  
the tense symmetry of tile.  
We steal an occasional glance

at lips moving in silent prayer,  
fingertips touching holy water  
as if it were hot, pressing  
its warmth between eyes.  
Even in church I fear the water,  
sprinkled and running on glass.

## Returning

At times I have been righteous  
without cause and turned my face away  
from those who were sincere, from  
grandfather who stood at his field's edge,  
spoke of rain and how it soaked the ground  
evenly, his sleeve snagged as he rested  
against the wire fence. I misunderstood,  
thinking he sought only excuses  
for fields that lie in stubble,  
that his words, it fell right nicely,  
the rain, offer simple observation.  
Leg over unsure leg, I make my way back  
across that fence. On this side  
positions seem more clear:  
red barns and split wood fences  
calm winter's stark trees,  
field mice are torn by the sudden owl.  
I stoop to take a frozen cob and shatter  
its clear nest of ice.  
There is no assurance of comfort here,  
only the clay that grips each step  
along the path. As I cross the field  
soil gives grudgingly beneath my feet  
and the barbs that once scarred my skin  
come clear in the distance.

## Afternoon At Seventy-Nine

The television reflects his face for hours  
while the tip of his cigarette fades,  
bending with the length of his thought.  
His son wrestled his arm  
to the tabletop years ago  
and grins now maybe too much  
as his wife undresses him for a bath.

He grips the air.

A photograph fills his eyes,  
two men with their arms surrounding  
one another like father and son.  
A red carnation blossomed  
a moment after the shot.  
Now his prayers lie,  
war relics in the cabinet,  
dead as the soldiers who carried them.

And he can dream now with his eyes open.  
Following the cracks in the wall,  
through dust streaming in the window,  
he remembers marks penciled on the frame,  
measuring his son's tenth year.  
He remembers the night he fell,  
drunk, cracking the plaster with his head.

He hasn't the time now even to grow a beard.  
But relieved to know  
the certainty of his flower blooming,

he'll continue his pilgrimage of the cracks,  
the effort of raising his arms  
one more time  
to have the shirt stripped from his back.

## In This Life

In August magnolia blossoms stain and curl  
inward. Juice runs to your elbow,  
the peach carelessly bitten.  
Out of fear you say that a child adjusts  
to a lack of deciduous trees,  
that a mind forms the even spacing of change  
without seasons, without the constant support  
of father and mother, of rivalry  
between sister, brother and desire.  
We've talked of this,  
those who shed the skin of family  
and start their own, and we agree  
that the accumulating leaves are boundaries,  
are surmountable. But you with a newborn son  
ignore the flux of discovery: your son  
lying on his back, touches his genitals,  
your parents lift him and a breeze sifts his hair.  
And what of the woman you touched with delicate hand  
and later stood anxious as she vanished  
into herself for hours and gave birth?  
What of the trees whose bones rattle in October,  
the sacrum of magnolia lapsing?  
It will be right, you say, to hide your hands  
in pockets, to allow the garden to lie fallow.  
Your fascination with breaking new land,  
with writing new tales to read to your wife and son,  
won't untangle tradition.  
You ask what it's like to discard the past,  
crumpling each conversation like paper.

I can tell you that it hurts.  
But to say that eyes clear like branches in season  
would be too simple. For it follows,  
confusion follows even this far.

Where You Have Not Lived  
for Amy and Rubel

Each morning you rise  
palms held open to one  
another, the early gray  
offering only routine:  
the exhaustion of city  
streets, crowds once again.  
But this dream of leaving,  
you hold on to, gather  
strength from and continue.

Sky and skin seem one  
color. To finally say  
goodbye will be meaningless.  
In this place, nothing is left.  
Piece by piece, books, photos,  
expectations have settled  
into an empty house in Arkansas.

It will be easy for you  
to leave the city, where sweat  
in humid August is a penance.  
There is reward in persistence.  
Removing one thing at a time  
will eventually empty a house,  
will eventually empty pockets,  
and the nest of friends  
in which your dream grew solid.

What promises do you embrace

on land that lies  
under river mud:  
sixteen acres and a mountain,  
fruit trees and Ozark folk  
who sing more clearly  
than people across the river.  
You think it's difficult  
to understand you from photographs.  
But your smile as you dance  
dirt over the roots of young  
apple trees explains enough.

There are songs you'll learn  
to sing among farmers. Perhaps  
when your first crop matures  
you'll look toward the eastern  
haze, back along the creek's twists,  
relax your hands from work,  
and remember.



## The Rocker And The Dog

Magnolia decay thickens  
the air, heavy with fruit.  
Beneath his arms sweat blossoms,  
his sleeves rolled up from work.

Already damned August arrives,  
and conversation draws up  
like fields in the heat,  
like the dog curling in shade.

He recalls singing in the fields  
after dark, the children holding  
jars lit with fireflies that burn  
and die like days,

the jars forgotten by morning.  
This heat has dried the bones  
by the roadside and the tears  
that came before. Kids gone,

the boards strain loud as ever  
beneath the rocker,  
under his shoes. And beer  
numbs the night into one sound.

He closes his eyes and sees  
the magnolia red with seed,  
the yard-dog chained at a puddle  
lapping away its face.

## Distinctions

At a window I long for my future,  
that it pull heavily at my cheeks and neck  
like the relaxing twilight.  
I long for its face to look back  
with pendent skin and the assurance  
that it is right to stand apart.  
I think of my friend who grew  
cold and afraid and took his life,  
who thought that scars always heal in sunlight.  
But still I wonder if his hand clutched  
at the shifting light on the carpet.  
And I am afraid, afraid each time  
the phone rings and I let it continue  
until it's relentless as his voice  
calling. I question the dead,  
their escape or release,  
and know there is a distinction.  
When I close my eyes, a woman in a country  
at war rebuilds her shop and trades  
with anyone. In a few days she'll fall  
against her child, against her counters,  
to finally stare into the sun.  
I open my eyes to the glass  
of scotch on the sill, the shadows  
on my face from too little sleep,  
the streetlight that grows suddenly bright.  
But one night does not reflect another.  
I no longer drive for hours  
to forget the disappointment,

or the anger at having been abandoned.  
Over and over,  
the face that I draw  
in my breath on the window means nothing.

## What Remains After All

After three years I recall  
your fire, built not for warmth  
but for a center to focus on.  
That night, like all others,  
assumed ritual: the cigarette poised  
to reflect an attitude, whiskey  
without ice.

\*\*\*\*

Maybe it's there you learned,  
in the hive gray city, in the absence,  
  
the conflux of bees  
a substitute. In the smoke black  
  
spoon and the clouding dilaudid  
the swarm begins. The needle's sting.  
  
The pulsed hum that burns  
and echoes away.

\*\*\*\*

You quit looking,  
said you'd found stars in the grooved bore  
of a gun. I didn't know  
something inside you had begun to move,  
to strip our religion of agreement  
to bare brick, to rain gently  
and increasingly harder.  
I didn't know that change could be  
as simple as loading. Disengaging.

Filling the chamber.

\*\*\*\*

Again, again the needle thumps  
steadily against the final groove.

The platter spins. The silence  
deepens with each revolution.

Maybe it's there you learned,  
in the harsh silence of each circling,  
  
that everything curls into itself,  
in time, a man into song.

\*\*\*\*

Death does not come at once.  
The steady throb of pulse accelerates  
after the bullet,  
but continues.  
Perhaps as you watched the rug  
sink quietly in blood, you knew  
satisfaction, perhaps not.

\*\*\*\*

The angry tread of tires  
rode the street wet. At the sound  
of sirens I no longer thought of change,  
only routine. Only the constant lurch  
toward morning, anticipated trains,  
radios beginning to bleed through walls.

The nausea of too many cigarettes leaves

only vagueness, a peripheral whiteness  
that blinds and directs.

It prepares me for looking up,  
to what I know lies above the rooftops.

Stars. Resolved in photographs  
into colorful patterns, it is best  
that they remain  
white, the street,  
the deliberate map we observe.  
We take one road leading outward, another  
leading back in.

The Silence Before

It takes only  
three fingers curled  
over silent keys

the piano's face looks  
back at my own looks  
quite like my own  
unforgiving and nervous

sound  
about to move through air  
geese in dark sky  
the echo  
of moon over water